SŪRAH 52

Al-Ṭūr

(Mount Sinai)

Prologue

This *sūrah* constitutes a profound and effective address to the human heart. It aims to eradicate doubts, misrepresentations and false assumptions that may linger in some corners of the human mind. It refutes every argument or excuse to justify deviation from the path of faith. It seeks to do this with an irresistible onslaught, one that inevitably forces submission. In order to achieve this, the *sūrah* employs all aspects of the Qur'ānic discourse including choice vocabulary, connotations, images, musical notes and beats. From start to finish, its verses flow like missiles fired in quick succession, its beats like thunderbolts and its images like a running, captivating film that does not stop for even a moment.

The *sūrah* begins with God's oath by some sacred things in the heavens and earth, some of which are well known and others that belong to the realm that lies beyond human perception: "*By Mount Sinai; by a scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment; by the much-visited House; by the vault raised high; by the swelling sea.*" (Verses 1–6) This oath confirms something really awesome and it fills its listeners with terror. It is expressed in words that most suit its feared outcome, painting an image that leaves the heart shuddering: "*your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it. On the day when the sky will shake and reel, and the mountains will move away.*" (Verses 7–10) As we visualize this

scene, we see and hear the horror that causes violent shaking, coupled with a well-deserved rebuke: "*Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, who idly play with vain trifles. On that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell, [and told:] 'This is the fire you used to deny! So is this sorcery, or do you not see? Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done.*" (Verses 11–16)

This represents the first part of the *sūrah*. It is immediately followed by a change of tone and colour. The *sūrah* now aims to hold before the very hearts and minds that saw the foregoing horror the prospect of safety and bliss. It depicts a scene of those who are God-fearing and the reward prepared for them. This is shown at ease, dwelling on pleasant details. It thus takes us from an air of punishment and suffering to one of happiness and enjoyment: "*The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire. 'Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.' They will recline on couches arranged in rows, and We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes. As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward for their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds. We provide them with fruit and meat as they desire. They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin. They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells. They will turn to one another, asking each other. They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching wind. We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.'*" (Verses 17–28)

In its third part the *sūrah* seeks to refute all doubts, misconceptions, excuses and false arguments. It presents the truth as simple, clear and powerful, and speaks with an irrefutable logic that allows no room for evasion. It holds out the truth forcing people to its acknowledgement and acceptance. This part begins by telling the Prophet to continue with his reminders to people, despite their ill treatment of him and his Companions. He should confront them with his overpowering logic:

"So, [Prophet,] remind people. By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman. Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.' Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.' Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude; or are they simply arrogant people? Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?' They certainly do not believe. Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true. Were they created out of nothing? Were they the creators? Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith. Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control? Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof. Is He to have only daughters and you sons? Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt? Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down? Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped. Have they, then, any deity other than God? Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him." (Verses 29–43)

This list of questions comes in quick succession, like thundering missiles that blow falsehood into smithereens, and silence every stubborn argument that tries to defy the truth. The *sūrah* portrays the unbelievers' stubbornness showing how they defy the truth in the face of every tangible reality: "*Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!'*" (Verse 44) Needless to say, there is a huge difference between a portion of sky falling and clouds moving *en masse*. Yet still they try to justify themselves. Hence, the *sūrah* aims its final missile at them, threatening them with the prospect of hell that is promised at the beginning: "*Leave them, then, until they face the day when they will be thunderstruck; the day when none of their scheming will be of any avail to them, when they will receive no support.*" (Verses 45–46) It then threatens them with a punishment that overtakes them before that promised day: "*Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it.*" (Verse 47)

The *sūrah* concludes on a happy note addressed to the Prophet whom they used to describe as a poet whose death they would await, or as a soothsayer or a madman. This happy ending is given so as to comfort and assure him of his position of honour. Indeed, this happy note has no parallel in the Qur'ān, and it was never previously addressed to any

other prophet or messenger: "*So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; for you are under Our watchful eyes. Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat.*" (Verses 48–49) This is a note of kindness that ensures that all the troubles the Prophet met with would not have the least effect on him.

Al-Ṭūr (Mount Sinai)

سُورَةُ الطُّورِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

By Mount Sinai; (1)

وَالطُّورِ ﴿١﴾

by a scripture inscribed (2)

وَكِتَابٍ مَّسْطُورٍ ﴿٢﴾

on unrolled parchment; (3)

فِي رَقٍّ مَّنشُورٍ ﴿٣﴾

by the much-visited House; (4)

وَالْبَيْتِ الْمَعْمُورِ ﴿٤﴾

by the vault raised high; (5)

وَالسَّقْفِ الْمَرْفُوعِ ﴿٥﴾

by the swelling sea; (6)

وَالْبَحْرِ الْمَسْجُورِ ﴿٦﴾

your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. (7)

إِنَّ عَذَابَ رَبِّكَ لَوَاقِعٌ ﴿٧﴾

Nothing can stop it. (8)

مَّا لَهُ مِن دَافِعٍ ﴿٨﴾

On the day when the sky will shake and reel, (9)

يَوْمَ تَمُورُ السَّمَاءُ مَوْرًا ﴿٩﴾

and the mountains will move away. (10)

وَتَسِيرُ الْجِبَالُ سَيْرًا ﴿١٠﴾

Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, (11)

فَوَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿١١﴾

who idly play with vain trifles. (12)

الَّذِينَ هُمْ فِي خَوْضٍ يَلْعَبُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

On that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell, (13)

يَوْمَ يُدَعُّونَ إِلَىٰ نَارِ جَهَنَّمَ دَعًّا ﴿١٣﴾

[and told:] 'This is the fire you used to deny! (14)

هَٰذِهِ النَّارُ الَّتِي كُنتُم بِهَا تُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

So is this sorcery, or do you not see? (15)

أَفَسِحْرٌ هَٰذَا أَمْ أَنتُمْ لَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done.' (16)

اصْلَوْهَا فَاصْبِرُوا أَوْ لَا تَصْبِرُوا
سَوَاءٌ عَلَيْكُمْ ۖ إِنَّمَا تُجْزَوْنَ مَا كُنتُمْ
تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, (17)

إِنَّ الْمُتَّقِينَ فِي جَنَّاتٍ وَنَعِيمٍ ﴿١٧﴾

rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire. (18)

فَاكِهِينَ بِمَا آتَاهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ ۖ وَوَقَاهُمْ
رَبُّهُمْ عَذَابَ الْجَحِيمِ ﴿١٨﴾

'Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.' (19)

كُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا هَنِيئًا بِمَا كُنتُمْ
تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

They will recline on couches arranged in rows, and We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes. (20)

مُتَّكِـِٔينَ عَلَىٰ سُرُرٍ مَّصْفُوفَةٍ ۖ وَزَوَّجْنَـٰهُم بِحُورٍ عِينٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward for their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds. (21)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَٱتَّبَعَتْهُمْ ذُرِّيَّتُهُم بِإِيمَـٰنٍ أَلْحَقْنَا بِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَمَآ أَلَتْنَـٰهُم مِّنْ عَمَلِهِم مِّن شَىْءٍ ۚ كُلُّ ٱمْرِئٍۭ بِمَا كَسَبَ رَهِينٌ ﴿٢١﴾

We provide them with fruit and meat as they desire. (22)

وَأَمْدَدْنَـٰهُم بِفَـٰكِهَةٍ وَلَحْمٍ مِّمَّا يَشْتَهُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin. (23)

يَتَنَـٰزَعُونَ فِيهَا كَأْسًا لَّا لَغْوٌ فِيهَا وَلَا تَأْثِيمٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells. (24)

وَيَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ غِلْمَانٌ لَّهُمْ كَأَنَّهُمْ لُؤْلُؤٌ مَّكْنُونٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

They will turn to one another, asking each other. (25)

وَأَقْبَلَ بَعْضُهُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ يَتَسَآءَلُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, (26)

قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّا كُنَّا قَبْلُ فِىٓ أَهْلِنَا مُشْفِقِينَ ﴿٢٦﴾

فَمَنَّ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْنَا وَوَقَىٰنَا عَذَابَ ٱلسَّمُومِ ﴿٢٧﴾

and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching wind. (27)

إِنَّا كُنَّا مِن قَبْلُ نَدْعُوهُ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلْبَرُّ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٢٨﴾

We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.' (28)

فَذَكِّرْ فَمَآ أَنتَ بِنِعْمَتِ رَبِّكَ بِكَاهِنٍ وَلَا مَجْنُونٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

So, [Prophet,] remind people. By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman. (29)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ شَاعِرٌ نَّتَرَبَّصُ بِهِۦ رَيْبَ ٱلْمَنُونِ ﴿٣٠﴾

Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.' (30)

قُلْ تَرَبَّصُوا۟ فَإِنِّى مَعَكُم مِّنَ ٱلْمُتَرَبِّصِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.' (31)

أَمْ تَأْمُرُهُمْ أَحْلَٰمُهُم بِهَٰذَآ ۚ أَمْ هُمْ قَوْمٌ طَاغُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude; or are they simply arrogant people? (32)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ تَقَوَّلَهُۥ ۚ بَل لَّا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?' They certainly do not believe. (33)

فَلْيَأْتُوا۟ بِحَدِيثٍ مِّثْلِهِۦٓ إِن كَانُوا۟ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true. (34)

أَمْ خُلِقُوا۟ مِنْ غَيْرِ شَىْءٍ أَمْ هُمُ ٱلْخَٰلِقُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Were they created out of nothing? Were they the creators? (35)

أَمْ خَلَقُوا۟ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ ۚ بَل لَّا يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith. (36)

أَمْ عِندَهُمْ خَزَآئِنُ رَبِّكَ أَمْ هُمُ ٱلْمُصَيْطِرُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control? (37)

أَمْ لَهُمْ سُلَّمٌ يَسْتَمِعُونَ فِيهِ ۖ فَلْيَأْتِ مُسْتَمِعُهُم بِسُلْطَٰنٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof. (38)

أَمْ لَهُ ٱلْبَنَٰتُ وَلَكُمُ ٱلْبَنُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

Is He to have only daughters and you sons? (39)

أَمْ تَسْـَٔلُهُمْ أَجْرًا فَهُم مِّن مَّغْرَمٍ مُّثْقَلُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt? (40)

أَمْ عِندَهُمُ ٱلْغَيْبُ فَهُمْ يَكْتُبُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down? (41)

أَمْ يُرِيدُونَ كَيْدًا ۖ فَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ هُمُ ٱلْمَكِيدُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped. (42)

أَمْ لَهُمْ إِلَٰهٌ غَيْرُ ٱللَّهِ ۚ سُبْحَٰنَ ٱللَّهِ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

Have they, then, any deity other than God? Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him. (43)

Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!' (44)

وَإِن يَرَوْا كِسْفًا مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ سَاقِطًا يَقُولُوا سَحَابٌ مَّرْكُومٌ ﴿٤٤﴾

Leave them, then, until they face the day when they will be thunderstruck; (45)

فَذَرْهُمْ حَتَّىٰ يُلَاقُوا يَوْمَهُمُ الَّذِي فِيهِ يُصْعَقُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

the day when none of their scheming will be of any avail to them, when they will receive no support. (46)

يَوْمَ لَا يُغْنِي عَنْهُمْ كَيْدُهُمْ شَيْئًا وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it. (47)

وَإِنَّ لِلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا عَذَابًا دُونَ ذَٰلِكَ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; for you are under Our watchful eyes. Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, (48)

وَاصْبِرْ لِحُكْمِ رَبِّكَ فَإِنَّكَ بِأَعْيُنِنَا وَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ حِينَ تَقُومُ ﴿٤٨﴾

and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat. (49)

وَمِنَ اللَّيْلِ فَسَبِّحْهُ وَإِدْبَارَ النُّجُومِ ﴿٤٩﴾

No Way Out

By Mount Sinai; by a scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment; by the much-visited House; by the vault raised high; by the swelling sea; your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it. On the day when the sky will shake and reel, and the mountains will

move away. Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, who idly play with vain trifles. On that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell, [and told:] 'This is the fire you used to deny! So is this sorcery, or do you not see? Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done. (Verses 1–16)

These short verses use varied rhyming endings and a measured cadence which they maintain. In the Arabic text, they begin with a verse with just one word. Then the verses combine two words, then add more words until we have the last verse in this section of 12 words, yet the same powerful note is maintained.

The first verse reads in Arabic as *Waṭ-Ṭūr*, translated here as *By Mount Sinai*. The Arabic word, *Ṭūr*, means a mountain with trees. Here, it most probably refers to the mountain mentioned in the Qur'ān, in Moses' story where he received the tablets. The overall ambience is one of sacred objects stated in an oath by God confirming that something momentous will certainly take place.

The scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment refers, most probably, to the book of Moses which was written for him on the tablets. This reading fits well with the mention of Mount Sinai in the first verse. However, some scholars say that the reference is to the 'imperishable tablet' in heaven, as this fits with what follows, referring to the *much-visited House* and the *vault raised high*. This again is a clearly possible meaning.

The *much-visited House* may refer to the Ka'bah although it is more likely that it refers to a house in heaven where the angels worship. An authentic *ḥadīth* giving details of the Prophet's night journey to heaven quotes him as saying: "Then I was taken up to the much-visited House. Seventy thousand enter it every day and they do not return to it. It is the last thing they have to do…" [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] The Prophet's statement means that the angels perform *ṭawāf* around this House, just as people do around the Ka'bah.

According to most scholars, the *vault raised high* refers to the sky. As he gave this explanation, Sufyān quoted the verse that says: "*We have set up the sky as a well-secured canopy.*" (21: 32)

The *swelling sea* means that it is full. This is the most appropriate thing to put together in a scene that depicts the sky. It is open, vast and full, which makes it a glorious and awesome sign that fits well with the other scenes making up the oath that confirms a great event. The adjective *masjūr*, translated here as swelling, may also mean set alight. In another *sūrah* we have a verse that says: "*When the seas are set alight.*" (81: 6) The phrase may also refer to some other creature.

God states an oath by these great creatures to confirm a great event. This opening makes us ready to receive it, fully aware that it is momentous: "*Your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it.*" (Verses 7–8) It is certain to happen. No one can stop it from happening. By their very sound, these two verses give the feeling that there is absolutely no question about its taking place. Furthermore, it overwhelms people: none can evade it. When a person receives this decisive note directly, without impediment, he feels its effect penetrate deep inside him. A report mentions that 'Umar went out one night to learn about people's conditions. As he passed by one house, he overheard someone reading this *sūrah* in prayer. When he read these two verses, he said: 'By God, the Lord of the Ka'bah, this is indeed a true oath.' He dismounted, leaned against a wall listening for a while. He then went home, feeling unwell. For a month, people continued to visit him, enquiring about his health, but no one knew his ailment.

'Umar knew this *sūrah*, having listened to it and read it many times before. Indeed, he listened to it as the Prophet used to read it in prayer. 'Umar was a learned person who was quick to appreciate such lessons. This time, however, his heart and feelings were ready recipients. Therefore, the message, powerful and focused as it is, was readily received by him, having a profound effect. It is as if 'Umar received these verses directly from their original source, just like the Prophet's heart did, but whereas the Prophet's heart was specially prepared to receive what God revealed to him, others do not have such abilities. Hence, when anyone experiences such a moment and receives some verses in this way, that person is bound to feel as 'Umar did.

These opening notes are followed by a fearful scene: "*On the day when the sky will shake and reel, and the mountains will move away.*" (Verses 9–10) We have here two images that leave us shaken, bewildered: the

sky that looks to us so firm and powerfully built is shaking and reeling, like high sea waves, and solid mountains slide away easily, lacking any firm base to stabilize them. It must be something extremely awesome that leaves the sky and the mountains in such chaos. So what will its effect on man be, a small and weak creature in the midst of a stupendous event?

Playing with Vain Trifles

In the midst of all this, the *sūrah* hurls on those who deny the truth of the divine message something more serious and frightening; namely, a prayer hastening their punishment by the Almighty: "*Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, who idly play with vain trifles.*" (Verses 11–12) Needless to say, a prayer by God means a sentence that is impossible to avoid, certain to come to pass, on that fearful day when the sky shakes and reels and the mountains slip away. All these terrible aspects thus confirm one another and overwhelm the deniers of truth who continue to play with vain trifles.

This description applies in the first place to the pagan Arabs, their primitive beliefs, insupportable concepts and their way of life which the Qur'ān describes in several places. It is all trifling play, nothing serious. They play like one hanging around in the middle of a lake, not aiming to reach the shore. Yet the description equally applies to anyone who leads their life on the basis of any concept other than the Islamic one. We cannot appreciate this unless we examine well known human concepts, as reflected in beliefs, legends or philosophies, and compare these with the Islamic concept of human existence in particular and the existence of the universe generally. All concepts, even those advanced by famous philosophers seem to be no more than children's attempts to arrive at the truth as compared with the simple, profound and powerful truth as expressed by Islam and the Qur'ān. This Islamic concept puts its address directly to human nature, free of exertion or complexity. Human nature immediately responds because what is presented to it fits perfectly with the profound truth inherent in it. It explains its relation to the universe, as well as the relation between the universe and its Creator.

As I read theories and concepts advanced by different philosophers, I often wonder at the strenuous efforts they exert to explain the existence

of the universe and its relations. They appear like a child attempting to solve an extremely complex mathematical problem. I look at the clear, simple, easy and natural approach the Qur'ān presents, which is free of crookedness and complexity. This is only to be expected for the Qur'ānic explanation of the universe is stated by the Creator of the universe. Philosophers' attempts are the product of small parts of the universe trying to explain its whole. The result of such miserable attempts is a foregone conclusion. When compared to the mature, sound and holistic concept the Qur'ān puts forward, they seem to be a medley of confusion, absurdity and child's play. Yet some people abandon the Qur'ānic picture and adopt those confused attempts!

A person may be influenced by some imperfect or deviant human attempt to explain life, human existence and the universe, and he will be confused as a result. He may then listen to a few verses of the Qur'ān addressing the subject he is struggling with and he will find comfort, enlightenment and a steady measure. There he will find that everything falls into place, where facts are stable, held in position. He will then be reassured by the clear truth presented by the Qur'ān. All confusion and worry will have disappeared.

People also appear to be playing with vain trifles when their concerns in life are compared to those Islam puts before people's minds, calling on them to implement these in their lives. A Muslim will look at the absurdity of such concerns. He will also look at those who indulge in them and who value them as great universal truths as simply absurd. Indeed, he looks at such people as a young girl looks at her doll, treating it as if it were a human being and talking to it as if it could share her thoughts.

Islam elevates people's concerns in as much as it elevates their concept of human existence and man's role in the universe. Furthermore, it provides clear and truthful answers to the questions everyone asks: Where have I come from, and why? Where do I go to when my term here is over? The Islamic answers to these questions define the true concept of existence. Man is not a unique kind of creature. He comes from where all creatures do, and he shares with them the reasons for their existence. He goes to where the Creator, in His infinite wisdom, determines. This means that the answers Islam provides for man's questions also give

man a complete explanation of the universe, the interrelation between its inhabitants, its relation with man, and the bond between them all and the Creator of all.

This explanation positively reflects on human concerns in life, elevating them. Therefore, a Muslim tends to think that other people's concerns are too trivial when compared with his preoccupation and the fulfilment of his major role in life. A Muslim's life is large because it is attached to the discharge of a great mission, one that relates to the existence of the universe and has a bearing on it. It is too precious to be wasted in trivialities.

The *sūrah* issues a serious warning about what happens to those who play with vain trifles "*on that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell.*" (Verse 13) This is a violent image. The *sūrah* uses the Arabic word *da''an*, which signifies being pushed hard from behind. This suits those who spend their lives playing with trifles, unconcerned with what takes place around them. Hence, they are driven and pushed in the back until they stand at the edge of hell's fire, where they are told: "*This is the fire you used to deny.*" (Verse 14)

At this point of utter distress, being pushed hard in the back and facing the fire in front, the unbelievers are faced with a strong rebuke that refers to their earlier denials: "*So is this sorcery, or do you not see?*" (Verse 15) They used to label the Qur'ān as sorcery. Is the fire they are now facing also sorcery? Or is it the frightening truth? Or is it that they do not see the fire of hell in the same way as they could not see the truth of the Qur'ān?

When this sarcastic rebuke is over, they are made to despair of any relief for their distress: "*Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done.*" (Verse 16) Nothing is more painful to one who has to face such a calamity than to know that bearing it with patience is the same as showing no patience at all. It will continue unabated and cannot be evaded in any way. Their suffering will be the same whether they panic or take things in their stride. Furthermore, it will continue regardless of what they do now. This suffering is the requital for what they have already done. Hence it cannot be altered.

For Believers and Offspring

The second section of the *sūrah* is one of excitement, spreading comfort and happiness, particularly after the preceding scenes of outright distress:

> *The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire. 'Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.' They will recline on couches arranged in rows, and We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes. As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward for their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds. We provide them with fruit and meat as they desire. They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin. They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells. They will turn to one another, asking each other. They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching wind. We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.'* (Verses 17–28)

This scene is close to material comfort. It is of the type that addresses feelings in the early period, tempting the human soul with physical pleasures in their refined form. It contrasts with the scene of crude painful suffering that those who are oblivious to the truth have to face: "*The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire.*" (Verses 17–18) Just mere protection from the suffering of the fire which has already been described is a great blessing. How is it to be viewed then when it is coupled with admission into gardens and bliss? Moreover, these believers enjoy what God provides them with. It is all comfort and luxury plus hospitality and honour: "*Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.*" (Verse 19) This in itself is a great blessing.

As they are so addressed from on high, they are told that they deserve whatever reward they are given. Furthermore, they will "*recline on couches arranged in rows*," giving them the pleasure of their brethren's company in such blissful surroundings. Yet, "*We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes.*" (Verse 20) This represents man's best enjoyment.

Further honour is granted as their offspring, who are also believers, join them in their place of bliss. This is added care. Even if their offspring do not attain the standards of the God-fearing, as long as they are believers, they join their parents without detracting anything from their parents' reward. In no way, however, does this detract from personal responsibility and individual accountability. Rather, it is a favour that God bestows on them all: "*As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward of their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds.*" (Verse 21)

More is added to the scene as we are introduced to other aspects of enjoyment in an atmosphere of perfect happiness. These dwellers of heaven are given varieties of fruits and meat, and they pass around a cup containing a drink that is totally different from the wines of this present world which loosen tongues with foul and dirty speech and tempt people into physical and mental sin. It is a pure drink causing no wrong: "*They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin.*" (Verse 23) They are gathered together as they pass it around, enjoying each other's company. At the same time they are served by youths who reflect pure innocence and a shining friendliness: "*They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells.*" (Verse 24)

This warm and happy scene is carried further as we are shown how these people in heaven converse, recalling memories of their worldly lives and outlining the reasons that ensured their happy end, with all its security, luxury, gratification and bliss. Thus the secret is given out and the way leading to this blissful ending is marked for all travellers: "*They will turn to one another, asking each other. They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching*

wind. We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.'" (Verses 25–28)

Thus, the secret is that they were always apprehensive about their outcome on the Day of Judgement. They feared what would happen when their records would be laid open and they would be called to account for their deeds. They entertained such apprehensions when they were with their families, enjoying seeming security, deceptive safety and dealing with worldly preoccupations. Yet they were neither deceived nor distracted. Therefore, God bestowed His grace on them and spared them the sort of suffering that seeps through the blood system like scorching poison. They realize that they are spared such suffering only by God's grace, which is bestowed in response to their fearing what the Day of Judgement might bring them. They certainly know that on its own, good action is not enough to admit the person doing it into heaven unless God bestows His grace on the person doing it. All that good action achieves is to testify that its doer has done his best, choosing what pleases God and earning His grace.

With all this fear and apprehension, the believers used to pray in earnest: "*We used to pray to Him.*" They were fully aware of those attributes of God that ensure goodly reward for His servants: "*He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 28)

A Reminder of God's Blessings

The *sūrah* now begins a series of rhetorical questions fashioned to a fast beat, presenting clear facts and addressing any remaining doubts the human soul might have. This round is full of strong challenges which no human heart can withstand:

> *So, [Prophet,] remind people. By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman. Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.' Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.' Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude? Or are they simply arrogant people? Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?' They certainly do not believe. Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true. Were they created*

out of nothing? Were they the creators? Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith. Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control? Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof. Is He to have only daughters and you sons? Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt? Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down? Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped. Have they, then, any deity other than God? Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him. Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!' (Verses 29–44)

The address here is to the Prophet: "*So, remind people.*" (Verse 29) He should continue to remind people, undeterred by their rude and impolite behaviour or their false accusations. They used to say of him that he was a soothsayer, or a madman. These two descriptions are linked by the common notion that soothsayers received their information from the *jinn*, and that the *jinn* possessed those who were mad. Thus, the devil was the common element in both descriptions. What made them use either adjective – poet or sorcerer – to describe the Prophet was the fact that they were overwhelmed by the Qur'ān. Its address was so unfamiliar to them even though, by nature, they were highly eloquent. Since they could not even think of admitting that it was God's word, they felt that they needed to provide some plausible explanation for its superiority over anything they or others could say. Hence they claimed that it was imparted by the *jinn*, or that the *jinn* helped in its composition. They alleged that the man reciting it, i.e. Muḥammad, was either a soothsayer receiving information from the jinn, or a sorcerer relying on the *jinn*'s help, or a poet who had a *jinnee* friend, or a madman possessed by a *jinnee* who gave him such wonderful speech.

This is a wicked accusation. Therefore, God consoles His Messenger showing it to be of no importance and reassuring him that he continues to enjoy His favours which allow no element of soothsaying or madness to affect him: "*By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman.*" (Verse 29) This is followed by a denunciation of their

assertion that he was a poet: "*Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.'*" (Verse 30) They indeed said that. Some of them counselled others to "bear with him, stick to our ways and soon enough he will die and we will be rid of him." Hence the Prophet is instructed to give them an implicit threat in his reply: "*Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.'*" (Verse 31) Soon enough, you will know who will end up in a better position.

Some of the Quraysh elders were accorded a position of respect on account of their perceived wisdom in conducting affairs. These are referred to here with a clear note of sarcasm, as their attitude to Islam is the antithesis of wisdom and logic. The *sūrah* sarcastically wonders whether the descriptions they attach to Muḥammad (peace be upon him) are what their wise elders have arrived at? Or is it that they are arrogant, unjust people who do not listen to what the wise elders counsel: "*Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude? Or are they simply arrogant people?*" (Verse 32) The first question is loaded with sharp sarcasm; the second carries an accusation that should put them to shame. One or the other is indeed true when they adopt such an absurd attitude.

They were always rude in what they said about the Prophet. They even accused him of fabricating what he said to them. The *sūrah* disapprovingly wonders whether they have made such a claim of fabrication against the Prophet, implying that such an allegation could never have been made: "*Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?'*" (Verse 33) It immediately explains what lies behind such a singular allegation: "*They certainly do not believe.*" (Verse 33) The fact that in their hearts they did not really believe is the reason why they made such a statement. They simply cannot appreciate the true nature of the Qur'ān. Had they appreciated it they would have known that no human being could have authored it, and that it could only have been delivered by a man of truth.

Since their hearts cannot appreciate the truth of this revelation, the *sūrah* challenges them to provide irrefutable proof: "*Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true.*" (Verse 34) This challenge occurs several times in the Qur'ān, yet those who deny the truth of the Qur'ān could not take up the challenge. Furthermore, this

challenge remains valid for the rest of time, and no one will ever be able to produce anything like the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ān has a special secret which is felt by everyone who begins to look at its text, before even attempting to identify its many miraculous aspects. He feels that the very words themselves speak with special authority. He senses that there is something extra, beyond the meanings the words impart to us; something that is felt by the heart as soon as one listens to the Qur'ān. Some people feel this very clearly, while others sense it even though they cannot identify it. Nonetheless it is there. It cannot be traced back to anything in particular: the phraseology, the meaning, the images and connotations, the special music that is so different from the rhythm of any other speech. Or is it produced by a combination of all these elements, or by these and something else beyond them that we cannot identify? This is something that is present in every Qur'ānic text, and it is felt initially by everyone who handles a Qur'ānic *sūrah*. Beyond this, there are phenomena that we can recognize and understand when we study the Qur'ān and contemplate its meanings and construction.

These phenomena are recognized in the clear, comprehensive and true concept the Qur'ān presents to our hearts and minds of the truth of human existence, of existence as a whole, and the essential truth of God Almighty. They are seen in the Qur'ānic method that seeks to implant this concept in man's mind as it addresses his nature in a way that is totally unfamiliar in human address. The Qur'ān appeals to the human mind with all its many facets, reflecting profound knowledge of man's every angle. We see the superiority of the Qur'ān in the comprehensiveness, balance and coherence of its directives that are all placed on the same level. This phenomenon is unknown in the works of human beings that cannot maintain the same situation or the same standard, and cannot address all aspects at the same time. Nothing that man produces can reflect absolute balance that admits neither increase nor decrease, and suffers neither shortage nor extravagance. No human work achieves absolute coherence that admits no discord or conflict either in essence or detail.

These and similar phenomena, as well as the subtle and the undeniably secret, combine to give the Qur'ān its quality of an absolute miracle that

remains valid for all time. No self respecting person can argue about this. He will readily admit the truth that stares him clearly in the face whenever he looks at the Qur'ān with an open mind: "*Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true.*" (Verse 34)

The next question wonders at their own existence, a truth staring them in the face which they cannot explain in any way other than what the Qur'ān states: God, the Creator of all that exists has brought them into existence: "*Were they created out of nothing? Were they the creators?*" (Verse 35) The thought that they just existed out of nothing is against the logic of nature. It merits no argument. On the other hand, neither they nor any other creature can claim that they created themselves. As neither case can be logically entertained, there only remains the true case stated in the Qur'ān, confirming that they are all creatures of God, the only Creator and Originator. Since no one can claim any share of His attributes of creation and origination, then Lordship and Godhead belong solely to Him. This is clear and true logic.

The *sūrah* then directs their attention to the heavens and the earth: are they the ones who created these? Needless to say, the heavens and the earth did not create themselves, in the same way as humans do not do so: "*Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith.*" (Verse 36) Neither they, nor anyone listening to the logic of nature, claim that the heavens and the earth created themselves or came into existence without being created. Nor do those people claim that they created them. Yet they stand in front of people like a question requiring an answer. When those very unbelievers were asked who created the heavens and the earth, they said that God created them. Yet this truth did not acquire such clarity as to produce its normal effects in their hearts and minds, leading them to formulate true and clear conviction: "*They have no faith.*" (Verse 36)

The *sūrah* then takes them a step lower than that of the creation of either themselves or the world around them. It asks them whether they own God's treasures or have control of these so as to be able to cause benefit and harm: "*Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control?*" (Verse 37) If they make no such claim, then who owns these treasures and controls all things? The Qur'ān says that God is the One who gives in plenty or in small measure, and who determines

all affairs in the universe. This is the only explanation of what happens in the universe.

A further step down is then taken, and the *sūrah* asks whether they have any means to listen to the source of revelation: "*Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof.*" (Verse 38) Muḥammad (peace be upon him) tells them that he is a Messenger of God and that he receives revelations from on high. They reject this, claiming it as false. The *sūrah* asks whether they have the means to climb up and listen to what He says, gaining information that supports their claims that he receives no such revelations, and asserts that the truth is contrary to what he says. This requires that they provide compelling evidence in support of their claims. This is an allusion to the great authority the Qur'ān speaks with, yet they reject its clear and powerful message.

The *sūrah* then brings into focus one of their absurd claims, alleging that the angels are God's daughters. It addresses them directly, adding an element of further reproach: "*Is He to have only daughters and you sons?*" (Verse 39) They considered girls to be inferior to boys, and anyone of them would be full of gloom and frustration when they were told that they had begot girls. Yet they unashamedly attribute female offspring to God Almighty. Thus the *sūrah* uses their own traditions and values to shame them.

They disliked receiving the Prophet's address. They disliked his message of guidance, feeling that it was a burden, even though it was given to them clear and pure. He asked no wages or payment for his trouble. The least that such a free presentation deserves is an appreciative response and a gentle refusal if they did not want to accept what he offered. Hence, the *sūrah* denounces their unjustified attitude: "*Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt?*" (Verse 40) Since they are not asked to pay anything for it, their attitude appears to be totally indefensible and unwarranted. They should be ashamed of themselves.

Again, the *sūrah* puts before them their true position in this universe. They are creatures with certain limitations. They are given access to a certain portion of this world, beyond which they cannot penetrate. It all belongs to the Creator. What lies beyond their reach is God's own

preserve and they have no knowledge of it: "*Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down?*" (Verse 41) They are well aware that they have no knowledge of what lies beyond their perception even though it is a reality. They have no means of accessing it. It is God who writes in its record whatever He determines for His creatures, while they cannot write a thing in it.

The One who is in control of that hidden reality and whatever occurs in that hidden realm is indeed the One who can determine and scheme. How come, then, that in their position of inability to record anything they try to scheme against you, aiming to entrap you? Why do they imagine that they can determine any future event, saying of the Prophet that he is a poet who would soon die? "*Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped.*" (Verse 42) It is they who are subject to whatever is determined by the Creator and Controller of the hidden reality. His schemes will certainly apply to them and take their effect. He is the best of all schemers.

"*Have they, then, any deity other than God?*" (Verse 43) Does such a deity, if they have one, protect them against what God determines for them? "*Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him.*" (Verse 43) How absurd is their false concept of God!

With this exaltation of God and its clear statement of His oneness this series of rhetorical questions, characterized by a powerful beat, is concluded. All their arguments have been refuted, and all doubts removed. They are presented with the clear truth and left without any excuse to justify their hostility to it. At this point their stubbornness in rejecting the clear truth is put clearly before their eyes: "*Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!'*" (Verse 44) This means that even if God decides to punish them by making a part of the sky fall down upon them, destroying their world, and they see it falling on their heads, they would still claim that it is but a mass of clouds, bringing rain and prosperity. It is just like the one who denies the truth of what he sees, even with a sword piercing his neck, as it were. This may be a reference to what the people of ʿĀd said when they saw the clouds heralding their own destruction. They claimed: "*This cloud will bring us rain.*" (46: 24) The truth was then told to them: "*No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a*

stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord." (46: 24–25)

Perfect Contrast

At this point, the *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to leave them alone. They will certainly face the day mentioned at the beginning of the *sūrah* and the severe punishment it will bring them. He is to remain steadfast in the face of whatever is determined by his Lord who bestows His care on him. He is to glorify his Lord when he wakes up early in the morning, in the depths of the night and at the time when the stars disappear:

> *Leave them, then, until they face the day when they will be thunderstruck; the day when none of their scheming will be of any avail to them, when they will receive no support. Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it. So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; for you are under Our watchful eyes. Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat.* (Verses 45–49)

This final passage begins with a clear warning against what will happen on that frightening day when the trumpet is first blown and they are all totally stunned. This takes place shortly before the resurrection, when nothing will be of benefit and no help can be expected from any quarter. If, in this life, they are able to scheme and take action, nothing can stave off what will happen on that day. However, they will also endure another type of suffering before that. This is left unspecified, but it is certain to happen: "*Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it.*" (Verse 47)

Thus this long and determined attack is concluded, bringing the unbelievers face to face with the severe punishments that await them, one close at hand and the other to occur later. The *sūrah* then speaks to the Prophet who was the target of their false accusations. He is instructed to face such adversity with patience. He is to remain steadfast, continuing his efforts to advocate God's message, and to leave the decision to God

who determines whatever He will: "*So, await in patience your Lord's judgement.*" (Verse 48)

Yet this directive is coupled with a confirmation of God's kindly care. Such loving care is certain to remove all hardship that the Prophet may have to face. Thus, perseverance in the face of adversity becomes acceptable, and even welcome, since it is the means to such compassionate care: "*For you are under Our watchful eyes.*" (Verse 48) This expression is unique, describing a position that has never been attained by any human being. Nowhere else in the Qur'ān is this expression used, even though some similar expressions of overflowing care are used.

Moses, for example, is told: "*Know that I have chosen you. Listen, then, to what is being revealed.*" (20: 13) "*I lavished My love on you, so that you may be reared under My watchful eye.*" (20: 39) "*I have chosen you for Myself.*" (20: 41) All these expressions speak of highly exalted positions, but Muḥammad (peace be upon him) is given an even higher distinction with this unique expression: "*For you are under Our watchful eyes.*" (Verse 48) This statement implies a unique aspect of friendliness and care. It imparts unparalleled connotations that no human expression can adequately describe. Therefore, we will not attempt any more than this reference to the fact.

Finally, the way to maintain this close contact is outlined: "*Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat.*" (Verses 48–49) Thus, throughout the day, as one wakes up, during the night, at the time when stars begin to disappear at dawn, there is a clear chance to enjoy such friendly care. Glorifying God imparts strength, friendliness and the chance of a heartfelt address to God Almighty. All this stems from a dearly loving heart!